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SUBJECT: The Early Stages of the New Honduran Congress and  
Its Struggle to be Effective: Leadership Will be Key

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The new Honduran Congress is made up of every extreme, with politics permeating every part of it. Because of the political diversity of this group, it has been hard for them to come to agreement on many of the issues that they face. Within Congress, the Liberal Party has the majority rule, and Roberto Micheletti, member of the Liberal Party, was elected as President of Congress. There is a record 30 women in Congress, who are in the process of forming a caucus in order to unite their forces. However, they have already been intimidated in order to keep them from forming the caucus. Outside of Congress, there is an elite group of three men, two of them being former Honduran presidents, who have an enormous influence on Congress, though the extent of this influence is often not apparent to the public. Though many important potential bills are pending, Congress passed legislative changes in order to comply with the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), a major accomplishment amid the early struggles Congress has been facing. Only with strong leadership from Micheletti will this Congress be successful. END SUMMARY.

#### Leadership/Structure of Congress

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¶2. (SBU) The Honduran Congress consists of the President, the Board, and the other members of Congress. There are 128 members total, which are divided in the following way: Liberal - 62, National - 55, Christian Democrats (CD) - 4, Democratic Unification (UD) - 5, Innovation and National Unity (PINU) - 2. Forty-six of the 62 Liberal Party congressmen ran on Zelaya's ticket in the primaries, including President of Congress Roberto Micheletti; this gives Zelaya what should be fairly strong loyalty from 74 percent of Liberal Party congressmen. The leaders of each party are as follows: Liberal Party - Valentin Suarez, National Party - Rodolfo Irias Navas, CD - Juan Ramon Velasquez Nazar, UD - Doris Gutierrez, and PINU - Toribio Aguilera.

¶3. (U) The president of Congress serves for the full four years of the Congress. Micheletti, the recently elected president, has been re-elected seven times to congress. One of the former presidential honor guards for President Morales in the 1960s, he was one of the first ones to escape when the coup of 1963 occurred. Micheletti has stated that he will not put up with absenteeism in Congress, as many congressmen/women only show up to pick up their checks and have used their two-year position to get rich and pay off their debts. He has also said that if commissions (committees) are not showing progress, that he will rotate congressmen/women between commissions.

¶4. (SBU) Even though Micheletti is president of Congress, there is another elite group of three men that informally run and oversee everything that happens within Congress. Carlos Flores Facuse (Liberal Party), former president of Congress and former president of Honduras, is a key player and considered by some observers to be the true ruler over Congress, as Micheletti is seen as his ally. During the heated debate and elections for president of Congress, Flores was the main mediator, and many meetings regarding the congressional presidency took place at his residence. Some observers claim nothing moves in Congress unless Carlos Flores first knows about it and approves it. His daughter, Elisabeth "Lizzy" Flores Flake has been appointed as first vice-president of Congress. It is too early to tell if she will succeed in this position.

¶5. (SBU) The other two within this elite group are Rafael Leonardo Callejas (National Party), former Honduran president, and Arturo Corrales (Christian Democrat), a well-known businessman connected to a family of politicians. Both attended and graduated from the American School in Tegucigalpa, and though they represent different parties, they are seen as political allies and de facto leaders of their respective parties. Flores, Callejas, and Corrales, even though not part of Congress, are very involved and very influential in Congress behind the scenes.

¶6. (SBU) The Board of Congress is appointed for two years and consists of four vice-presidents, two secretaries, two alternate secretaries, and two under secretaries. Most of the current Board is from the Liberal Party, but there is one member from the National Party and one from the CD Party. Juan Ramon Velasquez Nazar, the one member of the CD Party on the Board, has been looked upon with disdain by

some in his party and the National Party for siding with the Liberal Party during the Congressional leadership election, thus helping Micheletti secure his position as president of Congress.

#### Early Issues Within Congress

¶7. (U) There is currently a "Seventh Caucus" of women being formed within Congress. This Caucus consists of 30 congresswomen (including 15 from the Liberal Party, 11 from the National Party, two from the UD Party, one from the CD Party, and one from the PINU Party), plus 28 alternate congresswomen. If they do indeed form a block, then with only a few more supporters, they could potentially block legislation on the floor. However, they have already been threatened and intimidated in a veiled but obvious way by the major parties, in order to try and keep them from forming an effective caucus.

¶8. (SBU) Another major challenge for Congress is the fact that the majority of Congress is not generally well informed on any given issues and is expected to come in and vote on items prior to receiving sufficient background information. It seems as if there are very few who are really involved in Congress, and those few are the ones making most key decisions without true support from their counterparts. Most major decisions are usually made by this small group, frequently behind closed doors during late hours of the night.

#### Commissions

¶9. (U) There are 60 commissions total, with the Liberal Party leading 35, the National Party 19, the UD two, the CD two, and PINU two. Fifteen women and two Garifunas (Afro-Honduran minority group) preside over commissions. One leading Liberal Party member, Jose Azcona (son of former President Azcona) coordinates all 60 of the commissions. Each of the commissions has a total of seven congressmen/women who also take part in other commissions.

## Early Issues Congress is Addressing

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¶10. (U) The most significant issue that this Congress has addressed was the legislative change required before the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) could enter into force. All necessary changes have been approved by Congress.

¶11. (U) Telecommunications. Congress passed administrative regulations/changes in order to comply with CAFTA prior to its implementation. Congress is currently working to pass this new telecommunications framework law in order to open the market for competition. The draft bill would also make Hondutel (land-line monopoly in Honduras) more competitive so that it can compete if the framework law is passed and other competition enters the market.

¶12. (U) Congressional debate has also begun over the draft of the Domestic Violence Law which has become a major issue due to the large number of women in Congress. Many congresswomen are pushing the Domestic Violence Bill to the forefront and demanding that the law make men responsible and accountable for their children left with single mothers.

¶13. (U) The draft Forestry Law has been pending for four years, but there are indications that this law will surface again by this summer. The proposed law would reform and restructure the forestry sector and would create more severe punishments for the illegal cutting and shipment of wood. The Mining Law, like the Forestry Law, has been surrounded by lots of talk and little action, and also might resurface by this summer. This new law would help clarify current laws as well as outlaw open-pit mines. The Secretary of Natural Resources and Environment has not issued any new mining concessions for more than a year, due to the pending legislation.

¶14. (U) A new draft Civil Procedures Code, modeled on the Criminal Procedures Code, has just been presented to Congress and will also be a major piece of legislation up for debate.

¶15. (U) Congress has still not approved the budget for 2006. The discussions over approval of the budget have been postponed indefinitely.

## Post's View of Congress

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¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: During a recent visit to a congressional session, the disunity within Congress was very evident and the disinterest of the members clearly explained the slow pace at which issues are handled within Congress. The session seemed much more like a social hour, and many congressmen/women seemed to be there only because Micheletti is demanding their attendance. However, for many members of Congress, just because they are forced to show up does not mean they will actually bring anything meaningful to the table.

¶17. (SBU) Comment continued: Since the Liberal Party does not have an absolute majority, the larger parties are going to have to negotiate with the smaller ones, meaning that both the Liberal and National Parties will likely try to co-opt the smaller parties. The political diversity of Congress, much more divided than in past years, means it will probably be harder for congressmen/women to see eye to eye on the major issues they face. Although political diversity can be a good thing, with lots of freshmen members, outside influences, and the two major parties potentially at loggerheads, it will be difficult to have meaningful production from this Congress. President Micheletti will have a critical role to play, and because of the makeup of the Congress, he is going to have to work extremely hard to accomplish anything significant. Only with strong leadership from Micheletti and other top deputies will this Congress be successful. END COMMENT.

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